

## **Chronicle of Higher Education**

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### **Community college enrollments are up but institutions struggle to pay for them**

By STEVEN BUSHONG

On January 8, a record 803 people streamed through the doors of Mitchell Community College, in Statesville, N.C., to enroll for the spring semester — a 17-percent increase in turnout over last year. But some of those students may find there are not enough chairs.

North Carolina sets financing for each community college based on its previous year's enrollment numbers. So this semester, Mitchell will enroll hundreds of students it lacks the money to support, and it may have to turn away some who seek classes that are already full.

"That's when it becomes very frustrating," says Dan Manning, dean of student services, "when you look across the desk at the face and eyes of someone, and you can't help them because there is no money left in the pot."

The downturn in the economy has coincided with enrollment increases at many community colleges. Meanwhile, several states have trimmed — or even chopped — appropriations for higher education. Florida, New Mexico, Rhode Island, and Tennessee have each cut financing for 2009 by at least 5 percent, according to data compiled by the Center for the Study of Education Policy, at Illinois State University. Alabama and South Carolina have reduced allocations by more than 10 percent.

So far the hardest-hit institutions are those in states with a diminished manufacturing economy or a burst housing bubble, says George R. Boggs, president and chief executive of the American Association of Community Colleges.

Community-college officials have seen this pattern before: History holds that when the economy declines, college enrollments rise. But what worries many officials is that this recession may be long and deep. The ominous signs include a recent report by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which found that unemployment has reached a 16-year high.

"This is not a short-term problem," says Aims C. McGuinness Jr., a senior associate with the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, a nonprofit consulting group that advises states and public-college systems. "This is a time for having a clear mission and making strategic choices."

### **Tough Decisions**

The economy has already forced many institutions to do just that. In Maine, a \$2.9-million dip in state financing led the community-college system there to lay off 12 employees, freeze 14 vacant

positions, and reduce expenses for student labor. Meanwhile the system has about 600 more applicants than it did at the same time last year, a 20-percent increase.

"What you literally have is thousands of people queuing up to come, and you don't have the resources to add more faculty," says John Fitzsimmons, president of the Maine Community College system. "We have stretched our system very, very thin."

In Connecticut, community-college enrollments have increased by about 13 percent over last spring, while the state has cut its financing by 3 percent. Mary Anne Cox, the system's assistant chancellor, says the colleges have tapped a contingency fund to meet their immediate needs. The institutions have also reduced expenditures, frozen positions, and postponed discretionary purchases. "We've taken measures to reduce our budget so we can continue to serve students who come to us," she says.

The growing pains are less severe at Ivy Tech Community College, in Indiana. The institution has doubled its enrollment over the last 10 years, leading the state to invest more heavily in the multicampus institution. In turn, that allowed Ivy Tech to build more facilities and hire more faculty members.

This semester, the college plans to enroll 12 percent more students than it did last spring. Ivy Tech's president, Thomas J. Snyder, attributes the rising applications, in part, to a growing demand for more-skilled workers, and the increased competition for spots at four-year colleges.

"What we don't know is if this increase in enrollment would mitigate if not for" the recession, he says.

Recently Ivy Tech installed new computer software to better manage students and classes. It has also expanded its online courses.

Still, after the college absorbed a 1-percent cut in financing this year, Mr. Snyder expects further budget cuts, which would limit his resources. "The most important thing is to protect the faculty and staff," he says. "We want to add faculty when we need it."

### **'What Do They Need?'**

Tough times are good times for community colleges to re-evaluate their priorities, says Byron N. McClenney, who has served at the top post of several community colleges during the last three decades. He believes institutions can best weather the recession by determining which offerings and services are the most crucial.

"Who's walking off the buses and subways and walking through our front doors, and what do they need?" says Mr. McClenney, a senior lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin's College of Education.

Community colleges, he believes, must do all they can to preserve high-demand courses. In other words, introductory English courses might stay while philosophy goes.

Mr. McClenney also says that when institutions must cut faculty and staff, they should consider each position carefully and avoid across-the-board reductions.

But how should colleges make decisions about priorities? In large public meetings, says Mr. McClenney.

"Fear emerges when times are tough," he says. "People worry about losing their sections; they worry about their jobs; they worry about being able to teach their favorite courses. So you have to involve them."

### **Looking to the Government**

In Connecticut, where the threat of further cuts also looms, administrators are meeting with state legislators to explain why community colleges are so important — and to ask for budgetary mercy. In those meetings, Ms. Cox and her associates have described the effect of enrollment increases on campuses. They have also made a pitch that community colleges are essential to the state's work force.

"There are many things that are worthwhile but don't show a return on that investment," says Ms. Cox. "Higher education is one of the few public services that does have a very good rate of return."

That is exactly the message colleges should espouse to legislators, says Jack Scott, the new chancellor of California Community Colleges and a former state legislator. "We are the one sector of higher education that puts people to work more quickly," he says.

Some community-college officials hope that President-elect Barack Obama's \$800-billion economic-stimulus plan may bring their institutions more resources. Carl E. Haynes, president of Tompkins Cortland Community College, in New York, says his institution plans to build nine new classrooms and upgrade the campus's electrical wiring — a \$3.6-million project. He knows that stimulus funds could, perhaps, cover some or all of that cost.

"We're hopeful for that," Mr. Haynes says. "But the challenge for me is operating my college, and that won't help me operate it."

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